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Anna Barker and Leah Wilks Sift Through the Selves We Show the World in *Feature Presentation*

By Michaela Dwyer



Photo by Luke Barker

Anna Barks and Leah Wilks

"Performance" is a tricky word. On one hand, it connotes doing—an action, practice, or event. On the other, it measures the fulfillment of that action: How did I do? Did I fail or succeed? What do I need to change?

These kinds of questions factor into the ways we present ourselves to others, and as such, they animate **real.live.people.durham's** *Feature Presentation*, DIDA's season closer. Anna Barker developed the piece in the year and a half since her company's Durham debut, *it's not me it's you*, which took up the idiosyncrasies and obstacles of romantic relationships.

Now, in *Feature Presentation*, Barker again teams with Durham dance stalwart Leah Wilks to expand on that theme, investigating the complexities of "curated self-image."

Those who were among the sold-out crowds at Motorco for *it's not me it's you* will recognize the pointed humor and dance-theater vignettes of *Feature Presentation*. Barker and Wilks toggle between the specific and the general through gestural and spoken references to topics including juice cleanses, dance auditions, Durham's Northgate Park neighborhood, the behavior of politicians, and social media.

Barker's rehearsal shorthand for one section is "Planet Facebook." The bit casts the social platform, where users stage their self-image, in the vein of

the television show *Planet Earth*: an otherworldly Internet landscape the performers traverse.

"We're performers, and we perform offstage all the time," Barker says. The piece is a way for her to think about the roles she and Wilks inhabit in various spaces—as choreographers and performers, but also as instructors, friends, and community and family members. They set out to pinpoint and notate the nature of these offstage performances, distilling moments of self-awareness and then recasting them in the studio.

"A lot of [our research] comes out of our experience being in life," Barker says. "We spend a lot of time talking about things that happen and deciding whether they're interesting enough to investigate—whether they're prototypes of something much bigger."

If trying things on for size is part of Barker's creative process, it's also a literal performing-arts practice. In backstage dressing rooms, performers apply costumes and makeup, ready their muscles for movement, and chat in unscripted ways.

In *Feature Presentation*, Barker brings the idea of the dressing room onstage, delineating a boundary between that zone—where Barker and Wilks perform their everyday selves—and a stage zone where they take on other personas. The challenge, Wilks explains, is maintaining a presence that feels credible—and registers as such for the audience.

"A lot of [working on this piece] is thinking about how to be convinced that the world that we're creating in that moment is absolutely the world," Wilks says. "Inside of it, I can't read it as a parody of something."

Barker is strategic about inviting audiences into these worlds. For her, short scenarios offer glimpses into different experiences of self-presentation and possibilities for self-recognition. Taken together, the nonlinear vignettes encourage the audience to respond to the performance by filling in the blanks.

Barker aims to create work that affirms the name of her company, so it's crucial that the audience feels engaged.

"Part of my mission in all of my work is to make it accessible, so people can [see themselves in it]," Barker explains. "If I'm going to make work about people, people have to get it."

She also asks the community to commit materially. Like *it's not me it's you*, the new piece was funded via Kickstarter. It had (and exceeded) a higher target than its predecessor. That kind of community support builds trust, but it also builds expectations. Barker plays with those, too.

"I think we kind of pose that question to the audience," Barker says. "How are we doing? Did we succeed? Did it work?" You can answer for yourself when *Feature Presentation* premieres at The Trotter Building this weekend.

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